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## PALM WINE AND WITNESSES: THE IGBO CASE

"Palm wine and witnesses" is a direct inspiration from Palms, Wine and Witnesses (Parkin, 1972). In the book, Parkin discusses the significance of the coconut palm and the different uses to which some of the extracts of the tree have been put in the different stages of the economic development of the Giriama of Kenya (Parkin, 1972: 5-6.

Coconut palms are also found in Igboland, especially in the settled part of the villages (Basden, 1966: 177). The fruits of the tree are also useful (Basden, 1966: 289). But the oil palm is more important being almost ubiquitous and every part of it made use of (Basden, 1966: 399). Some aspect of the economic importance of the oil palm for Nigerians in general has been noted (see Oluwasami, 1966: 122-123; cfr. also Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1960, vol. 17 p. 161). But detailed studies on either of the palms is lacking. Only brief mention is made of palm wine and its uses (Basden, 1966: 125; Uchendu, 1965: 72). This contrasts vividly with the importance attached to the kola nut (Uchendu, 1964; 1965: 74-75; Nwokocha, 1969).

This article does not deal with the economic importance of the oil palm for the Igbo even though such studies are desirable. Here I deal specifically with palm wine in the context of people's behaviour towards it on very special occasions.<sup>1</sup>

1

Palm wine

The term palm wine refers to both the types of wine extracted from the oil palm and raffia palms respectively. In the Igbo language, Nkwu Enu refers to the wine extracted from the oil palm, while Ogolo is applied to that extracted from the raffia palm. The process of extracting both types of wine is much the same and may involve a great deal of risk to the wine

tapper. He has to climb each of his palms at least twice daily to renew the incision from which the juicy substance trickles into a container. During the morning rounds, he collects the wine, comes home and prepares it for the market if it must be sold, otherwise he may keep it for his domestic needs.

Before contact with Europeans, palm wine may have been the only alcoholic drink available to the people. At that time demand for the product was not high because most adult males met their own needs. Then income from the product was negligible. But today things have changed, and a good wine tapper gets a substantial revenue from his product.

Several reasons are suggested for the reversal of fortune in favour of the wine tapper. In the first place, there are not as many wine tappers as there used to be before the introduction of the school system. At that time, boys started learning the art of tapping from the age of eleven. But now this is the period when they are at school. Old men who can no longer support their weight on the tree refrain from climbing. Secondly, demand for palm wine has increased somewhat. During the early period of contact with Europeans and until after political independence in 1960, educated men among the Igbo felt it was mean to serve palm wine to guests. Some of them might even have declined an offer, for they associated drinking it with primitiveness. But the importance of palm wine has been revived, especially in recent years, with the special urge for a return to traditional culture. Palm wine is now served at the highest level among the Igbo. Guests may decline any imported wine in favour of "Palmy" as it is now called.

In other directions, the problems of the farmer with regard to the product have persisted. Whatever is produced must be sold the same day, otherwise it loses its flavour and would fetch considerably less the next day. (See also, Parkin, 1972: 10).

The purest palm wine is called Ohu elu ani or Ike elu ani. Literally this means that the calabash in which the wine tapper collected the palm

wine from the trees did not touch the ground. This is a figurative expression and means that no water has been added to the wine to increase its quantity, thereby weakening the strength of its alcoholic content. Normally the wine tapper returns to his house every morning after his rounds to add water to the wine collected to augment its quantity, thereby reducing its quality. The term Chu elu ani or Ike elu ani means that the wine tapper has not added water to the wine, leaving the wine pure and unadulterated.

In Ibagwa Aka it is considered a treat when a host offers his guest this special type of palm wine. It shows that the host holds his guest in special regard. The host takes a particular pride in informing the guest of the nature of the wine. It is also a warning to the guest not to consume too much of that type of wine because its alcoholic content is high.

When a palm tree is growing old, the process of killing it may be begun by tapping it in the middle while the tree is still standing. The normal process of obtaining palm wine from the oil palm is to tap on the sap. This time the farmer alters the method and bores a hole in the middle of the tree, and attaches a container to collect the juicy liquid substance. This type of palm wine is called iti. Iti is not encouraged in Ibagwa Aka.

But as the oil palm tree gets older and taller, the risk involved in climbing it increases. Fears are expressed that such trees could be blown down on to people or property. To forestall such an accident, the palm trees are cut down. But even with a tree in this condition, the ingenious tapper is bent on exploiting its wine potential. He makes a large incision on the bud on the side touching the ground, and digs a hole where he leaves a container which is connected to the incision. It is into this container that the palm wine flows. This type of palm wine is called Akpo in Ibagwa Aka.

Palm wine can be classified into five grades in the community. There is elu ani or Ike elu ani, which means the pure and unadulterated palm wine.

Next to this comes to oil palm wine to which water may have been added; then there is the iti, palm wine obtained from the middle of the tree; then there is akpo, the wine extracted from a dead tree. Finally there is ogolo, palm wine obtained from the raffia palm.

11

#### Presentation of palm wine

Unless it is the host who presents palm wine to his guest as an expression of his hospitality, palm wine formally presented to a host has a definite meaning: it implies request for a definite good or favour. Alternately, it shows an appreciation for some favour already done for the donor. In certain situations, however, individuals or parties who have caused breaches of the peace in the local community are asked to present palm wine to the group so affected as an acceptance of decorum.

An elder of a descent group has also the privilege of making representations to the group ancestors seasonally or in moments of crisis to intercede with them for the group. Invariably, he takes a pot of palm wine with him which he pours out as a libation. What is significant about the ancestors is that they accept the grade of palm wine which the living elders think is fit for themselves. In Ibagwa Aka, for example, old men refrain from drinking ogolo, akpo and iti because they claim such drinks cause stomach upsets for the very old, and for the same reason would not offer them in sacrifice at the altar of their ancestors.

In other respects, palm wine can be significant in the context of festivals, funerals and marriages (Basden, 1966: 125). At marriages, the presentation and drinking of palm wine can reveal some definite progress in a marriage process. At funerals and feasts, formal presentation of palm wine indicates friendship while drinking it on such occasion is not of great consequence because drinks are profuse and no one is bothered about where he drinks. I shall therefore analyse the presentation and drinking of palm wine in the context of marriage.

Broadly speaking, two types of marriages can be indentified in Ibagwa Aka, namely child marriage and adult marriage. Child marriages are all marriages negotiated and concluded without consulting the girl because she is too young. Such can take place from the moment a female child is born until she attains maturity, that is becomes capable of deciding for herself whether to marry, whom to marry, or terminate an existing contract because of its effect on her personality. Technically, child marriage means that a boy or girl could be married on the day he or she is born. For a girl, it means that wo families could negotiate and ratify a contract to marry off a girl on the day she is born. Such ties are normally realized by the institution of "Iwunye mmanyá n'eju". This literally means presenting palm wine and pouring it into a broken earthenware jug. But the expression is figurative. There is no suggestion that palm wine is actually poured into a broken vessel. However, palm wine offered and accepted in such a situation means a risk. Throughout this period leading up to maturity, all the efforts and money spent on the girl can be regarded as a great risk comparable to the risk involved in pouring a liquid into a broken vessel. This comparison is fair in its context, especially in a culture with high child mortality. At that age, it is still too uncertain whether the child will survive or not.

As soon as a female child is born, prospective parents-in-law would indicate their wish to seek her hand in marriage by presenting the symbolic palm wine. If the offer is accepted by the parents of the girl, duties consequent on marriage in the community would begin to be paid, the age of the child notwithstanding. These can include payment of money as brideprice; odd jobs such as repairing walls and fences for the mother-in-law.

From then on, a seal has been put on the girl. This means that she is formally engaged and the parents are forbidden by custom to accept or entertain any offer of marriage for the girl. This type of marriage still persists in the community. But they have become sources of marital

instability, especially when the child has been exposed to western culture through the school system. A girl can advance academically much higher than her suitor and subsequently find him distasteful and therefore unworthy of her. She can then choose a man with a similar educational background as herself, thus ending her child marriage.

Adult marriage, on the other hand, includes all cases of marriage where a girl is mature enough to decide on her preference for one man against another. Where such obtains, one or more prospective suitors can make approaches to her. She may be offered presents which she is free to accept or decline. Palm wine can also be presented to her parents as signs of their seriousness and determination to acquire her as wife. But these gestures have no significance as far as the girl's consent is concerned. What determines whether she is agreeable or not is whether she agrees to share a cup of wine with her suitor or any member of his family.

During marriage negotiations, the bride is not present. But she is asked to the hall before the palm wine brought for the occasion is shared out. This is a crucial moment in the process of negotiations for what she does at this stage would indicate whether the discussion is continued or terminated. Her father or guardian would ask her whether she knows that this gathering is about. A positive answer would elicit the next question: whether or not the palm wine should be shared. If she gives her consent, she is offered a cup of wine to drink. She must accept even if she never tasted palm wine before. Declining would mean the end of the negotiations.

If on the other hand, she accepts the cup of wine, kneels on one knee, and sips the wine a little and hands over the remaining contents of the cup to her suitor or her prospective father-in-law, this means consent. There is a general clapping of hands and murmurs of approval especially from the suitor's party. Here for a bride to share her cup with a suitor means consent and approval that the negotiations should go on. This marks a definite step in the girl's life. Actually it indicates a formal

transference of rights to the group and inviting everyone present to witness to the fact that she has decided to marry into a particular family. From that moment, the woman is regarded as belonging to the man and the negotiations are speeded up. Wherever palm wine is shared, the woman can no longer hand the cup to any member of her descent group.

In a mixed gathering and where there is wine to share, everyone present including women has a right to a share. But the woman is not expected to drain her glass or cup in public. She sips her cup as usual, scans the group and hands the remaining content of the cup to her husband or if he is not present to anybody from among his descent group. Under no circumstances should she hand her cup to members of her descent group if any of her marital group is present. If she ignores the rule deliberately, it becomes a public disclosure that the survival of the present contract is in doubt. Sharing palm wine in a mixed gathering can be regarded as a favourable opportunity whereby different messages regarding the state of a marriage can be communicated. The cup on such an occasion is the thing to be observed.

### III

Each year following the establishment of a marriage contract, presenting palm wine or failure to do so can still be an issue in a marriage in Ibagwa Aka. Such occasion is Egba Eze traditional festival. Egba Eze is a reunion feast held each year towards the end of February. Married daughters are expected to return to their natal home and worship their ancestors together with brothers and other sisters. Her husband comes with her bringing with him a pot of wine known as Mmanya Anyasi - literally night palm wine. Mmanya Anyasi is a technical term and need not be presented at night, but must be made available on a specific day prescribed by custom (see Anigbo, 1980: 136).

Mmanya Anyasi is loaded with meaning. It recalls the time when the woman was a baby and used to cry at night, making sleep difficult for her parents. The palm wine prescribed at the Egba Eze festival is regarded as



consolation for the parents for their labour in bringing up the child, and a clear sign that their troubles have been rewarded. For the son-in-law, it is a thanksgiving offering for obtaining a wife, and joy for the continuity of his marriage. Failure to meet this social obligation is a symbolic demonstration that his interest in the marriage is weakening. If, for example, the palm wine is sent through an intermediary, such as a son or brother, when the husband is healthy, this in itself means that the man may be at odds with his wife or her group.

On the part of the woman for whom the wine is presented, it is a means of identification, a sign of belonging. For a woman to be without kin to whom her husband should carry the traditional palm wine suggests that she is a woman without social identity, who would be at the mercy of her husband. The Egba Eze festival therefore provides an occasion whereby the woman reinforces her ties with the members of her natal group, and her husband reviews his interest in the marriage. The symbolism of Mmanya Anyasi becomes a social idiom through which the value of the relationship of sister and husband is openly revealed to the members of the lineage or descent group. In Ibagwa Aha this is important because the woman is interred in her natal group's land on her death. The presentation of palm wine becomes an index of the type of welcome to be accorded the affines when they bring the remains for burial. Moreover, in traditional Igboland, the marriage bond is permanent so long as there is peace and an expressed wish to continue the relationship.

Mmanya Anyasi is also a symbolic demonstration of the continuity of the marriage process. If the husband dies, one of his brothers would inherit the woman - ikuchi - and have children of his own by her. He would equally inherit the obligation to present Mmanya Anyasi. But if the woman is too old to be remarried after her first husband's death, the man's sons by the woman would take over the obligation and present the palm wine to their maternal uncles. However, if she has no children and is too old to be remarried, she may visit her home during Egba Eze but no one has the

obligation to present the palm wine. When she dies, the ties established between her natal group and the group into which she married would cease. In the final analysis, Mmanya Anyasi could be interpreted as representing the concept of children or sexual rights. As long as there is one of these the obligation to present the palm wine is binding.

Mmanya Anyasi is obligatory in all cases of marriage in Ibagwa Aka. Decision to marry from the community must take into consideration the fact of Mmanya Anyasi and that obligation must be met during Egba Eze. Sons-in-law could present palm wine to their fathers-in-law at any time during the year, but that is not a replacement for palm wine at Egba Eze. This obligation imposed by custom creates a favourable opportunity whereby all the women born to the descent groups can meet at least once a year. In the community it does not matter whether a girl married out of the town or not - as long as the practice of reunion at Egba Eze is kept. For it promotes the unity and solidarity and projects the image of the group to a visiting husband. This is important for the woman and serves as a warning to the husband to be kind to his wife. This is because an unhappy marriage caused by a wicked husband is punished by a wife's brothers during her funeral.

Traditionally married women are interred in their natal home. But it is the husband's group who must return her remains in a solemn profession. If however the husband's party had so ill-used the woman during the lifetime of the marriage, the mock battle would degenerate into a real battle at which the wife's brothers take revenge on the husband and his group to redeem the honour of their sister (see Anigbo, 1980: 276 ff.).

The obligation of Mmanya Anyasi can generate some conflicts in the community, especially as many of the people have been converted to Christianity. In Igboland, part of the teaching of Christianity incorporates dissociation from traditional festivals because of their close links with traditional religious worship. But the Christian converts must marry and very often they do so from families whose members have not all been converted.

As traditional marriage negotiations do not include marriage duties, parents do not understand why they are not entitled to Mmanya Anyasi during Egba Eze. Moreover, for them the presentation of Mmanya Anyasi means that their daughter is at peace with her husband and that they intend to keep the marriage going. But for the converts, Mmanya Anyasi during Egba Eze means traditional religious worship in which their new faith forbids them to take part.

For quite some time, different kinds of solutions have been given to resolve the conflict over the issue of Mmanya Anyasi. Some Christians have urged the abolition of the custom seeing in it only a participation in traditional religious worship. This was unacceptable to the community who saw it as a move to strengthen the Christian concept of the indissolubility of the marriage bond since with the abolition wives' brothers would no longer have the opportunity to examine the state of marriage of their sister. Others have expressed the wish that Christians present their own palm wine at Easter time. This has serious implications because it would disrupt the group and divide married Christians from those who are not converted. It is also a treat to Egba Eze itself, for as more and more people get converted, the emphasis to return will focus on Easter and not Egba Eze itself. This in itself is significant and shows the importance of the symbolism of Mmanya Anyasi over the traditional festival.

## VI

### Palm wine and identity

Sharing palm wine can restructure the group and define the identity of those partaking. This is on formal occasions. Otherwise individuals can meet together in a market place, contribute money, buy a calabash of wine, share it and remember each other afterwards on that basis. Sharing palm wine becomes a basis for friendship. On formal occasions however, sharing and drinking palm wine can reveal the identity of different categories of people involved. In such situations, rules governing the sharing of this

apply. Among the Igbo, the method of sharing things is institutionalized. There it is the youngest in a group whose duty it is to share things out and the oldest man picks first (Anigbo, 1980: 291).

If the pot of wine is large, some of the contents can be poured out into a small container to make lifting and sharing much easier. If several people are gathered together, a middle servant may be elected to act as a medium between the pourer of wine and the rest of the assembly. It is this man who takes the wine and hands the cup in strict order to the people seated around.

But before anyone drinks, the pourer of wine serves the oldest man in the group for him to address the ancestors. For this, he does not need to go to the ancestral shrine. He is also free to stand or sit in making the address. First, he invokes his own ancestors, calling each of them by name, tracing his genealogy until he reaches the mythical founding ancestor from whom the village community originated. He would also call the names of the ancestors of others who are present if he knows them, otherwise he would inquire. He would invite all of them to come together to witness to the solemnity of the occasion and enable the living to deliberate properly on the reason which brought them together. Having completed the invocation, he throws the wine on the ground or floor, apparently for the ancestors to drink. This is because by implication, the ancestors are at one with the land.

The man who said the prayer would drink whatever is left in the cup before handing it back to the pourer of wine. Those present render him ovation recalling his nickname or titles as the case may be. The ovation has many implications: it confirms that the man who said the prayer has the right to do so on behalf of everyone present. It also underlines his originality in the land for guests cannot come to an alien land and successfully invoke either his own ancestor or the ancestors of his host. This is because, in the first place, his ancestors are not there because the land is not their own. Secondly, the ancestors of the place cannot

answer his call because they do not know a stranger or guest. The host however can invoke his ancestor as well as those of his guests. This is because the ancestors live on the land as if it were a corporation. For a guest to invoke his ancestors in an alien land is to cause a conflict because it is an assertion that the land belongs to his group. Formal address to the ancestors mirrors the Igbo social world and gives a direct hint about their feeling for the dead. Just as a host can honour his strangers or guests by inviting them to share meals with them, in the same way, the ancestors can allow the ancestors of a guest to participate in a meal with them.

The ovation also shows that the prayer has met the aspirations of the different individuals who are gathered for the occasion. What the occasion is expressed in the words of the address. After the address the sharing of the wine proceeds as prescribed by custom.

On formal occasions, the individual who bore the burden of having to bring the pot of wine to the premises is served first following the ancestors. This is more privilege than attestation that the wine is free from poison. The Igbo do not think that food or drinks destined for use for a big gathering can be poisoned. This is because they are gregarious and anyone can come and share wine whether he is invited or not. Poison in such a situation could therefore be suicidal for anyone can be affected.

After these initial rituals, the wine is passed around according to the seating positions. The pourer of wine must indicate to the middle man how the wine is going. If it is running out, older men may assist the distribution by proposing ways of convincing everyone that nobody is being cheated. This could mean handing out two or three cups of wine to each descent group when it is obvious that sharing out the wine in the original systematic manner will not be achieved before the wine completely runs out. When wine is getting short, even people who earlier may have appeared to be drunk seem to regain normal consciousness. This is the time when fighting

breaks out because someone may have abused privileges by taking more than his fair share of the drink.

At last the dregs of the palm wine are left in the cup. The pourer of wine indicated this by placing the container on the floor in a position which will make it clear that the wine is finished. He may also announce this by saying: "Anyi ewee ohu mmanya" or "Ike mmanya" which simply means that the dregs of the wine are in the cup.

This normally belongs to the oldest man in the group as of right. It means that oldest man must be there physically. Even a mere absence of some moments excludes him. But it can be difficult to say who the individual is in view of many considerations: physical age, the relationship of the individual to the land, that is whether the old man is the host, a guest or a total stranger. All these can influence his entitlement to the dregs. Moreover, traditional Igbo had no clock to guide their proceedings. When a sufficient number of those expected have arrived, the oldest among them can say a word of address to the ancestors. Thus in certain situations more and more elderly people can arrive after the opening words of address, in which case such officer is excluded from the dregs. Whatever happens the cup is held until it is clearly certified to whom the dregs are due.

Sometimes, there is a mistake. If discovered in time, it is corrected; but if ignored deliberately, it can split the group into little pockets of hostile persons each determined to defend his position by the strength of his fists. Here, it becomes obvious that someone's rights are being denied him because of his lowliness or other considerations. This is in fact where custom and reason are at variance.

For hygienic reasons, the dregs are unfit for human consumption, being composed of sediments of the drink and other debris which may have collected and settled at the bottom of the pot. For that, it should have been thrown away. But custom rules otherwise and makes the dregs the most important issue in palm wine drinking. For it calls everybody present to witness

the identity of different individuals present and accord them their respective rights and privileges.

V

#### Conclusion

Palm wine for the Igbo is common; it is locally produced and consumed there too because it will not keep beyond a day or two. But its use in social life is both meaningful and very significant. Generally it is used to finish up hospitality when both host and guest share it for relaxation.

But in Ibagwa Aka and for most Igbo communities the use of palm wine in the context of marriage is something to be watched. For on such occasions, in a most subtle manner it reveals the innermost feeling of a man or a woman. The presentation of palm wine both at the beginning of a marriage and throughout the life of the union is an indication of the seriousness of the man and his overall interest in the marriage. For the woman, it is not the presentation but sharing the cup that has a definite meaning. What she does with her cup of wine in a formal occasion, that is, if she shares the cup with her husband or fails to do so, becomes revelation of her own interest in the marriage.

Generally, the sharing of palm wine can dramatize the basic issues in Igbo social structure and reveals their egalitarianism. Everyone present where palm wine is shared expects to be served. But whether equality is enforced in the sharing is dependent on the kind of interest which the pot of wine represents. For in a situation where each member of a group has equal rights to the drink, each person must be served his full share even though the recipient is already drunk. Not to uphold a person's right in such a situation can lead to a serious disruption. Finally, the dregs, still held in the cup, invites everybody present to witness to the fact that the wine is finished. It also demands a critical appraisal of the members present in order to certify by common consensus, the individual to whom it is due. Not to observe this rule can lead to dissension.

Therefore on formal occasions, a cup of palm wine can signify the rights of various individuals within a group. It can also mean a successful marriage or one that is failing. It can foster unity, aggression, as well as mutual respect. Above all, it can stand for abuses of different kinds.

The cup of wine can favourably be compared to the issue of the chalice in the Bohemian struggle<sup>2</sup> (see Kamisky, 1967). At one stage in the struggle, the chalice or the cup of Holy Communion represents Communion under the species of Bread and Wine (Kamisky, 1967: 145). The chalice also stands for the higher clergy whose privileges include the right to receive Holy Communion on both species. The chalice also stood for abuses because it is believed that priests denied it to the laity because it would prolong church service and make it difficult for them to have sufficient time to enjoy their wealth (Kamisky, 1967: 120). The chalice also stands for the unity of Christians, for unity definitely precedes revolution or reform.

The comparison offers a deeper understanding of the necessity of symbols in a culture. For the Igbo, it is not even the wine in the cup but the cup itself that is significant. For a woman can accept her share of drinks and without even drinking it pass it over to her husband and still show that her marriage is firm. Likewise, the old man can touch the cup containing the dregs, allow others to drink it and feel that he has enjoyed his privileges. Similarly, the mere sight of the chalice or even mentioning it became for the Bohemians a symbol of their struggle (Betts, 1969: 125). To appreciate a symbol therefore means to understand the various dimensions of a people's culture in an actual situation.



Notes

1. The article reflects a general experience of the basic rules governing the sharing of palm wine among the Igbo of Nigeria. The analysis leans heavily on data obtained in Ibagwa Aka, an Igbo village community five miles North of the University town of Nsukka. I lived in the village for four years carrying out field work with special bias to the problems of sharing food in the community. The result of the research is embodied in a Doctoral Thesis presented and successfully defended at the University of London (1980). The title of the Thesis is: Commensality and Social Change in Ibagwa Aka, Anambra State, Nigeria.
2. There was a crisis in the Church of Bohemia in the 16th century generally understood as Utraquism - or the movement for Holy Communion under the species of Bread and Wine. The advocates of the movement, best represented in the person of John Hus, opposed the practice at the time which allowed only Higher Clergy to receive both species of Bread and Wine in Holy Communion while the lay people only received Bread. The movement regarded the practice as an abuse of the teaching of Christ "Believe me when I tell you this, you can have no life in yourselves, unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood" (Joh, 6.53). The struggle was vehemently maintained with the Chalice as a symbol of the movement.

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